



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## THE NEGROES IN MAURITIUS<sup>1</sup>

Mauritius was discovered by the Portuguese in 1505 and remained in their possession until 1598, when it was ceded to the Dutch, who gave it the name by which it is now known. Aside from erecting a fort at Grand Port, however, the Dutch did no more for the development of the colony than the Portuguese. The Dutch finally abandoned it in 1710 when the island was taken over by the French. Under the French the island was considerably developed, especially during the second half of the eighteenth century, and this new step, as the majority saw it, necessitated the introduction of slavery. During the Napoleonic Wars Mauritius was captured by England and was formally ceded by France in 1814.

The significant history of the Negroes in Mauritius, however, dates from the year 1723 when the East India Company of France, in order to promote agriculture in the Island, sanctioned the introduction of slaves, whom they sold to the inhabitants at a certain fixed price. This price was seldom paid at the moment of purchase, and, as many evaded payment altogether. Mahé de Labourdounais, the

<sup>1</sup> For the leading facts of the life and history of Mauritius see the following: Charles Pridham's *England's Colonial Empire* (London, 1846); *Le Premier Établissement des Neerlandais à Maurice; A Transport Voyage to the Mauritius and Back*; Baron Grant, *History of Mauritius or the Isle of France and the Neighboring Islands*; Jacques Henri Bernardin de St. Pierre, *A Voyage to the Island of Mauritius, the Isle of Bourbon, the Cape of Good Hope, etc.* (London, 1775); Le Baron d'Unienville, *Statistique de l'île de France et ses Dépendances* (Paris, 1838); M. J. Milbert, *Voyage pittoresque à l'île de France à Cap de Bonne Espérance et à l'île de Tenerife* (Paris, 1812); Adrien d'Épinay, *Renseignements pour servir à l'histoire de l'île de France jusqu'à l'année 1810, inclusivement, précédés de notes sur la découverte de l'île sur l'occupation hollandaise*; Henri Prentout, *L'île de France sous Decaen, 1803-1810* (Paris, 1901); Patrick Beaton, *Creoles and Coolies* (London, 1858); Nicholas Pike, *Subtropical Rambles in the Land of the Aphanapteryz* (New York, 1873); and *An Account of the Island of Mauritius and its Dependencies by a Late Official Resident.*

then Governor of the Colony, received instructions on this point, the execution of which made him unpopular among the inhabitants.<sup>2</sup>

The slave trade, at this period, was principally in the hands of those pirates who had formed a settlement at Nossibé (Nossé Ibrahim), on the northeast coast of Madagascar, where they had been received with kindness and hospitality by the natives. In return they excited a war between the tribes in the interior and those inhabiting the seacoast, and purchased the prisoners made by both for the purpose of conveying them for sale to Bourbon or Mauritius. If the prisoners thus obtained proved insufficient to the demands of the slave market, a descent was made on some part of the Island, a village was surrounded, and its younger and more vigorous inhabitants were borne off to a state of perpetual slavery.<sup>3</sup>

Harrowing as the scenes witnessed in such forays must have been, the slave trade from Madagascar to Mauritius was not accompanied with the same horrors as from the neighboring continent to America, if history be credited. Its victims were spared the toiling and harassing march from the interior and the horrors of being cribbed and confined for successive weeks beneath the hatches till they reached their final destination; and yet, of every five Negroes embarked at Madagascar, not more than two were found fit for service in Mauritius. The rest either stifled beneath the hatches, starved themselves to death, died of putrid fever, became the food of sharks, fled to the mountains, or fell beneath the driver's lash.

Mahé de Labourdounais was not the founder of slavery. The institution preceded his arrival. Slavery existed in Mauritius even under the Dutch régime. Of every eighteen slaves in the colony one died annually, so that if the traffic had ceased for eighteen years, at the end of that time the whole black population would have died out. From first

<sup>2</sup> Adrian d'Espinay *Renseignements, etc.*, 112-113; *An Account of the Island of Mauritius*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Grant, *History of Mauritius*, 74.

to last Mauritius has been the tomb of more than a million of Africans. Their lamentable history is like the roll of the prophet, written within and without, and the writing thereof is mourning and lamentation.

Many became fugitives, and sometimes by daring adventure returned to Africa. In order to check the fugitive slaves, Labourdounais employed their countrymen against them, and formed a mounted police who protected the colonists from their incursions.<sup>4</sup> To preserve the inhabitants from famine, he introduced the cassava from the Island of St. Jago and the Brazils, and published an ordinance by which every planter was compelled to put under cultivation five hundred feet of cassava for every slave that he possessed. The planters, an ignorant and indolent race, used every measure to degenerate and discredit this innovation, and in some cases destroyed the plantations of the cassava by pouring boiling water on the root. The benefit conferred by this ordinance was later felt and appreciated when their crops were destroyed by the hurricanes or devoured by locusts. The cassava was immune from either of these casualties and was the usual article of food for the Negroes. Labourdounais instructed the slaves in the art of ship building, made them sailors and soldiers and found them highly useful in the expedition which he undertook against the English in India. He endeavored also to mitigate their sufferings from the enforcement of the regulations of the *Code Noir*.

After the dispersion of the pirates, the slave trade fell into the hands of European merchants or Creole colonists, who extended it to the adjoining coasts of Africa. The Mozambique Negroes were found more tractable than those of Madagascar, but Negroes were obtained from both points, according to the difficulties and exigencies of the traffic. The price paid by the French at Madagascar for a man or a woman from the age of thirteen to forty was two muskets, two cartridge boxes, ten flints, and ten balls, or fifteen

<sup>4</sup> Grant, *History of Mauritius*, 74-75.

hundred balls or seventeen hundred flints. In spite of the price the trade developed. In 1766 there were about 25,000 slaves and 1200 free Negroes in the colony. In 1799 there were 55,000 of the former class and 35,000 of the latter. In 1832 they were estimated at 16,000 free Negroes and 63,500 slaves. It seems difficult to account for the diminution among the free Negro population. Baron Grant de Vaux<sup>5</sup> states that to prevent the increase of this class it was enacted that no slaves should be liberated save those who had saved the lives of their masters. A kind-hearted master, however, could always give his slave an opportunity to save his life.

Slavery as it developed in Maritius falls in three epochs. During the earliest period the institution gradually took the form of a system somewhat like that of the bondage of the Hebrews, modified in the case of Mauritius, however, according to the requirements of the temper and habits of the natives and the situation of the planters. There was no regard for the comfort of the slaves and they tended to degrade to the lowest depths. Yet the slaves were not considered altogether as chattels, convertible at the will of their masters. In the second stage, however, the bondage of the Negro reached the darkest age of irresponsibility to law and cruelty absolutely intolerable. A few officials and planters protested, and travelers who saw the horror appealed for mercy in behalf of the unfortunate.<sup>6</sup> A change in the attitude of the planters toward the slaves was finally forced and characterized the third stage of slavery in Mauritius. These cruelties were mitigated largely by the agitation of *Les Amis des Noirs*, among whom were some of the most distinguished actors in the grand drama of the French Revolution. The leading reformers were the brilliant orators Mirabeau and Madam de Poivre, the wife of the deceased Intendant of the Isle of France. At a much earlier date, even under Labourdounais, under whose eco-

<sup>5</sup> Grant, *History of Mauritius*, p. 75, 1801.

<sup>6</sup> Pridham, *England's Colonial Empire*, I, 160.

conomic development of Mauritius slavery flourished, much was said about improving the condition of the slaves.<sup>7</sup> Yet it was not until the rule of De Caen that we observe actual efforts to provide for the slaves, such as better nourishment, religious instruction and legal marriage.<sup>8</sup>

The first attempt to emancipate the slaves was made by the leaders of the French Revolution, who, while they professed to discard Christianity as a revelation from God, deduced the equality of all men before God from the principles of natural reason.<sup>9</sup> The prohibition of slavery was rendered null and void by the planters of Mauritius and the members of local government, all of whom were slaveholders and opposed to any change. The only effect of the prohibition was to alienate the affections of the colonists from the mother-country, and to lead them to rejoice when Napoleon assumed the consular power and annulled the ordinance prohibiting slavery after the capture of the island by the British. The importation of slaves was prohibited under severe penalties.

As the execution of this law was vested in the local authorities, who had a direct personal interest in the continuance of this traffic, slaves were still imported in sufficient numbers to satisfy the wants of the planters.<sup>10</sup> It is true that trading in slaves was declared to be felony, that the two harbors of Port Louis and Matubourg were closed against their entrance, that a slave registry was opened in 1815, and that credulous Governors wrote to the home authorities that the Mauritians, far from wishing to renew this nefarious traffic, were filled with indignation at the remembrance of its horrors. All this may be true, but the slave trade was as brisk as ever, and the island swarmed with Negroes whose peculiar appearance and ignorance of

<sup>7</sup> Beaton, *Creoles and Coolies*, 94-111; *An Account of the Island of Mauritius and its Dependencies by a Late Official Resident*, p. 19; Adrien d'Epinaÿ, *Renseignements, etc.*, pp. 112-113.

<sup>8</sup> Henri Prentout, *L'île de France sous DeCaen*, 126.

<sup>9</sup> Pridham, p. 154.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

the Creole language proved them to be of recent introduction.

No law can be executed unless it be in accordance with public opinion, and the feelings of the white Mauritians were altogether in favor of slavery. The illicit introduction of slaves was a felony by law, and yet, notwithstanding the notorious violations of this law, no one was ever convicted. The prisoner might have turned on the judge and proved his complicity in the crime. The only convictions that were obtained were in the case of offenders that were sent to England for trial. This statement will excite no astonishment on the part of those who are acquainted with the manner in which justice is still administered in Mauritius. The slave registry was opened in 1815, but the entries were so falsified that instead of checking slavery it threw its mantle of protection upon it.<sup>11</sup> Slaves were not introduced publicly at the two chief ports of the island from Africa, but the Seychelles Islands lay at a convenient distance, and slaves registered at the Seychelles were admitted into Mauritius without any questions being asked. The coral reef that surrounds the island could easily be passed and the slaves loaded in those light coasters that are used by fishermen. The governors were surrounded by functionaries who were slaveholders and who were therefore interested in supporting the traffic and screening the offenders from punishment, so that their reports, based on information received from these parties, were not entitled to much credit.

As to the feelings of indignation expressed by the colonists at the remembrance of the horrors of the slave trade, it is sufficient to remark that rogues are always louder in protestation of their innocence than honest men—that this change of feeling was too rapid to be sincere, and that truthfulness of character does not stand high in the code of Mauritian morality, to judge from the attitude of the white population.

In judging the treatment of the slaves in Mauritius, re-

<sup>11</sup> Pridham, p. 157.

course must be had to those writers who visited or lived in the colony during the prevalence of slavery, and have given the world the benefit of their experience. These are St. Pierre, Soumerat and Baron Grant. St. Pierre spent several years in the island, and mingled freely with the inhabitants of all classes. The last was born in the island where his father had sought to retrieve his fortune after the failure of Law's Mississippi scheme. The pictures presented in the writings of St. Pierre might appear exaggerated, or prejudiced, if drawn by a foreigner; but it must be borne in mind that he describes only what he witnessed, and that his good faith has never been questioned.<sup>12</sup> He thus speaks of the importation and treatment of slaves:

“They are landed with just a rag around their loins. The men are ranged on one side and the women on the other with their infants, who cling from fear to their mothers. The planter, having examined them as he would a horse, buys what may then attract him. Brothers, sisters, friends, lovers, are now torn asunder, and bidding each other a long farewell, are driven weeping to the plantations they are bought for. Sometimes they turned desperate, fancying that the white people intended eating their flesh, making red wine of their blood, and powder of their bones. They were treated in the following manner:

“At break of day a signal of three smacks of a whip called them to work, when each betook himself with his spade to the plantation, where they worked almost naked in the heat of the sun. Their food was bruised or boiled maize, or bread made of cassava root, their clothing a single piece of linen. Upon the commission of the most trivial offence, they were tied hands and feet to a ladder, where the overseer approached with a whip like a postilion's and gave them fifty, a hundred, and perhaps two hundred lashes upon the back. Each stroke carried off its portion of skin. The poor wretch was then untied, an iron collar with three spikes put round his neck, and he was then sent back to his task. Some of them were unable to sit down for a month after this beating—a punishment inflicted with equal severity on women as on men. In the evening, when they returned home, they were obliged to pray for the prosperity of their masters, and

<sup>12</sup> Pridham, pp. 164, 165.



wish them a good night before they retired to rest. There was a law in force in their favor called the *Code Noir* or the Black Code, which ordained that they should receive no more than thirty lashes for any offence, that they should not work on Sundays, that they should eat meat once a week, and have a new shirt every year; but this was not observed.”<sup>13</sup>

Soumerat, who visited the island during the period of slavery, speaks of their treatment by their white masters in the following terms:

“I have known humane and compassionate masters who, instead of maltreating them, tried to mitigate their servile condition, but they are very few in number. The rest exercise over their Negroes a cruel and revolting tyranny. The slave, after having labored the whole day, sees himself obliged to search for his food in the woods, and lives only on unwholesome roots. They die of misery and bad treatment, without exciting the smallest feeling of pity, and consequently they never let slip any opportunity of breaking their chains in order to escape to the forests in search of independence and misery.”

So miserable indeed was their condition that they welcomed death as a friend, and often committed crime in the hope of being executed.<sup>14</sup> Conditions decidedly improved in Mauritius, however, after the British took possession in 1814. The freedom of slaves was then agitated throughout the civilized world. The British interfered with slavery there in 1826, endeavoring to ease the burden of the bondmen. In 1829 the charter of the slave population was proclaimed. It provided for the religious instruction of the slaves, the recognition of the sanctity of the Sabbath, toleration in worship, the right of the slave to contract marriage, and prohibition of the separation of husband from wife or the mother from her children. Slaves were made competent to acquire stock and movable or immovable property. They were given power to dispose of property by will. Punishments were diminished and the way to elevation to civil power was opened.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Bernardin de St. Pierre, *A Voyage, etc.*, pp. 100-105.

<sup>14</sup> Pridham, p. 161.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 175-175.

The end of this ordeal finally came. The British Emancipation Act was passed in 1833. From 1834 the traffic in human flesh ceased. In 1839 all slaves in Mauritius six years old and upwards became apprentice laborers and remained so until 1841 as regarded field laborers, and until 1839 for those unattached. There were then in the island 39,464 men and boys and 25,856 women and girls, in all 65,320. Knowing that the change in the status of so many inhabitants might interfere with the labor supply, the planters prepared for this contingency by importing coolies from Ceylon and India. By 1838 they had brought in 24,566 such natives, but because they had managed the importation so badly that many evils resulted therefrom, it was stopped by public protest. When the apprentices were freed in 1839, however, there followed such a scarcity of labor that the immigration of the Cingalese and Hindoos was reopened. So many have since then made their way to the island that they now constitute a substantial element of the colony. So much race admixture has followed, on the other hand, that observers sometimes refer to the Mauritians as creoles and coolies.

A. F. FOKER